

Walking in the Way of Peace After Our Tragedy

Rise & Shine, September 9th

Romans 8:28

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Paul assures those in Rome in his letter that God will care for them in their struggles. The verse above does not assert that bad things won't happen, or tragedy won't strike, but only that all things – good and bad – will work together for good for the followers of Christ Jesus.

Lamentations 3:21-24

*But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
(For context, read 3:1-24.)*

The Book of Lamentations begins with a litany of pain that God has put upon his people. Finally, in the middle of chapter 3 the poet turns toward hope in the knowledge that God's mercy and forgiveness is everlasting.

Questions: How do you find hope in God during the tragedies in your life? How have you seen things, bad and good, work together for the Good of the world?

In the news

A Shooting on Fountain Square

He could have been anyone, going anywhere. A young man in a white buttoned-down shirt and dark pants, black work bag slung over his shoulder, walking across Fountain Square on a Thursday morning. He made a few stops around the square. He blended into the crowd, moving among the bankers and accountants and lawyers and clerks and secretaries as if he were one of them. As if he belonged. But he didn't.

Omar Santa Perez wasn't going to work or catching a bus. He wasn't here for a job interview or a meeting. In his bag, Santa Perez carried a 9 mm handgun and 250 bullets. In his mind, he carried something else entirely. Malice? Anger? Grievances? Police will spend days or weeks trying to find a reason for what happened next, trying to explain what was going on in the head of a man who might have struggled to explain it himself.

Later we would find out that, on at least two occasions, Omar Santa Perez's mother and sister argued before Palm Beach County judges that Santa was violent and mentally ill when he was punching walls, talking to himself, refusing to take medication, and frightening his sister and mother in various incidents between 2010 and 2012. In both instances, a judge ordered that Santa be evaluated by mental health professionals. Santa also was referred by a separate judge in Broward County to be diverted to a mental health court.

If someone goes into treatment involuntarily, he or she typically is prevented from buying a gun legally. It's unclear whether Santa went into treatment voluntarily or involuntarily. And, though the FBI maintains the national database of people who are prohibited from buying firearms, it is also unclear whether Santa's name was ever put on that list stemming from the Florida incidents.

What is clear is that Santa bought his 9 mm semiautomatic handgun legally on Aug. 2 – a day after his 29th birthday. When he'd finished walking around Fountain Square, Santa Perez sat for several minutes at a table near the entrance to the lobby of Fifth Third Center. He sipped coffee from a Starbucks cup. He spoke to no one. No one noticed him at all, really, until he rose from his chair at 9:06 a.m. and walked into the lobby, black bag still slung over his shoulder.

Eboni Ginyard stopped pouring the coffee at the Dunkin Donuts counter as soon as she heard the first shot. She didn't recognize the sound at first and thought maybe it was coming from the construction site nearby. But then she heard it again. And again. Ginyard looked around and saw her customers hit the floor, and she did the same. Those were gunshots, she thought, and they were close. More shots followed and she realized they were coming from the Fifth Third lobby, adjacent to her doughnut shop. She heard breaking glass and screaming. She smelled gunpowder. They all laid as flat as they could on the floor and Ginyard didn't dare lift her head to get a better look. She was sure she'd die if she did.

On the other side of Walnut Street, Roger Higginbotham was working at the construction site. It was loud work, so he wasn't sure about all the noise coming from Fifth Third Center. He spotted a homeless man crouching near his truck. "Somebody's shooting a gun!" the man said. Higginbotham started walking toward the gunfire. He knew it probably wasn't his brightest move, but he wanted to know what was going on. From the sidewalk, he saw a man in the lobby with a gun. Through the Dunkin Donuts window, he could see two women huddled together on the floor. They looked terrified. They looked as scared as anyone he'd ever seen.

The police officers were already on Walnut Street near Fountain Square when they heard the shots and ran together toward the Fifth Third lobby. Guns drawn, officers Jennifer Chilton, Gregory Toyas, Antonio Etter and Eric Kaminsky spread out in a line as they approached the gunfire, taking cover in different spots along the wall and between windows to make it harder for the gunman to zero in on them all.

"On your shoulder," Chilton told the officer in front of her, letting him know she was there.

As they approached, the pace of the shooting picked up. So much was happening at once. The shots. The breaking glass. They needed to stop the gunman and they needed to do it fast. But first, they had to find him.

Santa Perez walked quickly through the lobby, with purpose, right arm extended with the 9 mm in his hand. He shot at people diving under desks. He shot at people running away. He shot at people in an elevator, spraying bullets at the door as it closed. Unarmed security guards pulled workers around corners and out of the line of fire. But five times, Santa Perez found his mark.

Whitney Austin, a 37-year-old from Louisville, had her cell phone to her ear as she entered the lobby's revolving doors. She was on a conference call for work. A bullet struck her immediately, knocking her to the floor. Santa Perez kept firing at her. Austin was shot 12 times in all, but she never lost consciousness. She and Brian Sarver, a man who was also shot in the lobby, would survive their wounds. Three others would not.

Richard Newcomer, 64, was supervising a construction project on the building's third floor. Prudhvi Raj Kandepi, 25, was a programmer and consultant for Fifth Third. Luis Calderon, 48, moved to Cincinnati last year to

work for the bank. All three died in the chaos. And Santa Perez kept walking, hand extended, firing at anything that moved.

Michael Richardson was on the square, smoking a cigarette, when he saw Austin walk into the building. Then heard the shots and saw her drop. More shots followed and Richardson took cover, but he kept watching. He saw a security guard or a police officer, he's not sure which, grab Austin and drag her away from the shattered glass and gunfire. Her shirt was covered in blood.

The four police officers spotted Santa Perez through the window as he walked past, his arm still extended, still firing. Chilton yelled to her fellow officers. "Shots, shots, shots!" She stepped from behind a wall and fired several shots. Each smashed through the lobby window and scattered glass everywhere. The other officers fired, too, and the sound echoed across the square, as if someone was firing a machine gun.

There was swearing and confusion. And then nothing. Silence. The officers crept closer until one of them could see through the shattered window. "Suspect down!" The officers edged closer and tugged open one of the doors to the lobby. Santa Perez was on the floor, face down. His black bag was next to him, his gun beyond his reach.

He wasn't moving. The lobby was quiet. The officers kept moving closer, guns still drawn and pointed at Santa Perez. It was 9:10 a.m., 4 minutes and 28 seconds after it began.

"I'm with you," Chilton said to the officer in front of her. "I'm with you." Then, once more. "I'm with you."

Prayer for Cities (BCP p.825)

Heavenly Father, in your Word you have given us a vision of that holy City to which the nations of the world bring their glory: Behold and visit, we pray, Cincinnati.
Renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life.
Send us honest and able leaders. Enable us to eliminate poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, and that men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*